DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 813 HE 005 893

AUTHOR Sexton, Robert F.; Stephenson, John B.
TITLE Experiential Learning at the University of Kentucky: Institutionalizing Academic Change.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Objectives; *Field Experience Programs; *Higher Education; Internship Programs; Learning Experience; *Program Descriptions; *Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Experiential Learning; *University of Kentucky

ABSTRACT

This document reviews the development and progress of the experiential education program at the University of Kentucky. Following a review of why experiential education was developed and the stages of that development, emphasis is placed on the progress of the program in relation to its goals and objectives. (HJM)

ED 095813

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY: INSTITUTIONALIZING ACADEMIC CHANGE

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Robert F. Sexton, Executive Director
Office for Experiential Education
University of Kentucky

and

John B. Stephenson
Dean of Undergraduate Studies
University of Kentucky

HE 005 893

Not yet a year ago, the University of Kentucky created an Office for Experiential Education to develop and coordinate the off-campus learning activities of all university students. Because of contemporary interest in experiential education we have been asked many times to explain the causes and implications of this development: in essence, to explain how a traditional land grant university instituted a non-traditional program and what the phenomenon means.

Reflection on the development of experiential education at the University of Kentucky leads to two basic questions. The first involves the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Office for Experiential Education at the University of Kentucky. What allowed it to happen, especially in a species of institution whose rigidity and inertia are legendary? The second question concerns the real progress we have made, and what the creation of an administrative office has actually meant in terms of the "institutionalization" of this change.

The first question can be approached through a straightforward narration of events between 1970 and 1973, when the Office was created. It would be additionally helpful, if we could abstract from the story of what happened some guiding concepts and principles to explain what happened. If such concepts and principles are valid, they might be put to use again, at the University of Kentucky and elsewhere. Therefore, let us first generalize a bit. For what happened at UK underscores the importance of the following principles, which are no news to social scientists, students of change, or practiced administrators:

1. The use of influentials and elites is essential in the

process of diffusion and adoption of innovations.

2. Timing is important in effecting change, from the standpoint of "client" readiness, competing demands for resources, and support from elites, to name only three aspects.

3. The management and coordination of communications to maintain a proper flow of information is another essential. Communications management is best achieved from points of organizational or system centrality.

4. It is important that innovations be defined by potential adopters as consistent with existing norms and shared objectives and likely to fulfill felt needs.

5. Of overriding importance is the very basic principle that success in bringing about change is always a mixture of calculated strategy and dumb luck. The mixture may contain 5% of the former and 95% of the latter!

Leaving these generalities and moving on to the particular experience of the University of Kentucky, our success with experiential education has been the result of a combination of circumstances; some carefully planned over the last four years, some the result of specific institutional characteristics, and some the result of historical accident. To analyze these circumstances, we should examine the role of the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies; the impact of the University Year for Action program; and the importance of a relatively small group of advocates scattered throughout the University.

Recognizing the impact on undergraduate programs of a greatly increased emphasis on graduate training in the early and middle sixties, the University of Kentucky attempted to check this swing partly through creating the office of the Dean of Undergraduate

Studies. The position was created in 1967, and was first filled in 1970. In some respects the counterpart to the Graduate Dean, the Undergraduate Dean was to improve program effectiveness, improve instruction and advising, and generally attend to those academic concerns which were of common interest to the dozen or so colleges offering undergraduate degrees. The position was filled partly to respond to growing student demands for changes in undergraduate programs, and it quickly became one of the University's more visible symbols of "innovation."

It was through the auspices of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies that the University applied for a University Year for Action planning grant in fall, 1971. Following a strategy laid jointly by the Dean, a development official with the University Research Foundation, and the Director of the Center for Developmental Change (an interdisciplinary campus center which had been important in developing proposals in such areas as welfare research, Peace Corps training, and Appalachian research), the so-called Committee of Forty was assembled to assist in drafting the proposal. The Committee of Forty was large, representative, supportive, and hardworking. For such a sizeable and diverse group, it was surprisingly flexible. The Planning Director, together with the Committee of Forty, organized and submitted a proposal which became the model proposal for UYA in Washington for months---a fact which was later almost our undoing in Lexington.

Washington approved the UYA program proposal, and the University was in the experiential education business on a multi-college basis on January 1?, 1972, less than four months after it had first conceived the possibility. Among the institutional

changes necessary for getting the grant was the commitment to granting 30 hours of academic credit to students serving in the off-campus program. (Some were incredulous, having already decided that the institution was congenitally incapable of rapid change.)

Of course, scattered but significant off-campus learning activities already existed on the campus. In addition to programs in education, social work, and the medical fields, the Department of Political Science had been active in developing state government internship programs which carried fifteen hours of academic credit. These internships had been widely publicized and their patron faculty member was a highly respected scholar. In one respect, then, education through field placements was not a radical innovation at the University of Kentucky.

But the "take-off" for development of experiential learning from such scattered beginnings to the eventual creation of a University-wide Office for Experiential Education depended not only on carefully laid strategies, but on several fortuitous events and decisions.

One of these was early resolution of the "credit problem" by two members of the Committee of Forty, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs and the Chairman of the Senate Council. Their plan was to obtain top-level approval for a new University-wide course granting up to 15 credit hours per semester, but to make its use by any given student contingent on the approval of a department and a college. (The alternative would have been to wait upon the unlikely common initiative or around ninety departments to come up with such a course.) This course, University Year for Action 396, will this year be modified as a departmental

300-level course in a gradual, planned move toward an estab-lsihed, university-wide, variable credit experiential education course.

Another strategic decision was to locate the UYA program under the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, which in turn reports to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. This meant that from the beginning the program benefitted, to a certain degree, from an aura of established academic credibility. This factor became of more crucial importance in later stages than at the beginning. Numerous UYA programs across the nation were initially attached to student services, volunteer offices, or specific professional colleges such as social work or urban studies. To "institutionalize" these programs must cross the bridge to the academic administration of the institution, or expand to engage the broader university community. They are attempting to do this as their federal funding ends, so not only have they lost the initial financial advantage, but they are tackling an academic-political objective which is inherently difficult.

Another fortuitous effect of UYA was the establishment of a core of persons on and off the campus, often from unexpected quarters, who could intelligently discuss and rationally visualize the potential of the UYA model. Among these were the Vice President for Academic Affairs, whose support was vital to the effort. Another was a former chairman of the Psychology Department, a highly respected member of the University community and a person who had experience as an evaluator of Peace Corps. This person eventually played an important role in evaluating UYA and later became academic co-director of UYA. Another was the Planning Director, a vigorous, imaginative assistant professor who

subsequently became Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. And almost by accident, one of the authors of this narrative became involved as a member of the Committee of Forty in his role as Director of the State Internship Program in Frankfort. Other members of this core group came from such diverse areas as Law, Architecture, Dentistry, Community Medicine, and Vocational Education.

Almost any way one looks at it, the early experience of the UK-UYA program was a near disaster. If there was little time available for planning, there was even less available for implementation. Staffing was completed virtually overnight. There was insufficient time to orient the staff to the complex philosophy of a new program which was to satisfy Washington that poverty was being attacked in a respectable academic fashion, to persuade faculty that learning was taking place under the banner of service, and to convince students that learning objectives could be achieved outside the classroom. Needless to say, the motives of those who participated in those early months were varied and conflicting. The conflict erupted. Surprisingly, it was not faculty who contested an academic ripoff; it was students who contested what they considered another ripoff of the poor. In addition, some agencies felt they had been seriously misled by an overzealous recruiter. Had it not been for a steadfast, mature director who kept a cool head throughout this period of travail, the University would have terminated the project within three months of its beginning.

But UYA survived its nervous launching, which is not to say that it was an unmitigated success even a year or so later. It

still faced problems such as its narrow focus on poverty, its requirement of full academic credit for 12 months full-time work for undergraduates, its apparent inflation of grades, its low rate of faculty involvement in supervision and evaluation, and its exploitation by students with questionable motivation, to name the most important. Nevertheless, UYA has served and is serving its purpose: to allow experimentation with experiential learning just so such problems could be identified and dealt with. And UYA has been a foundation, however shaky it may seem, upon which to build a more solid educational structure.

Thus, the University's experiment with UYA, although not completely successful, provided both the stimulant and the vehicle for the development of the broader concept of experiential education.

Several factors from the UYA experience, as well as other circumstances only partially related to the program, contributed to whatever success we now enjoy.

At the top of this list of circumstances contributing to the maintenance of innovation was the basic credibility of experiential education proponents. In addition to the former chairman of psychology, these included the chairman of the political science department, highly respected faculty in anthropology and sociology, and the Deans of the Colleges of Education, Social Professions, and Agriculture, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Whatever their individual reasons for supporting the reform, these persons played quiet but decisive roles. Of crucial importance also was the breadth of the small support group---it silenced from the beginning the argument that such education was

only advantageous to a small segment of the University or only to the professional colleges. We also saw that a small nuclei of strong supporters, located in the right places and mobilized by the Office of Undergraduate Studies, was as effective as larger numbers would have been.

Another contributing factor was the absence of organized opposition to experiential learning. In part this was due to the role of the persons above, but even more it was the result of the non-threatening nature of the experiment and pure good luck. The internal proposal which created the Office for Experiential Education had argued not that some radical alternative to tradition was being undertaken, but instead that experiential education should build upon existing programs. The proposal was also reviewed by the deans of all 15 colleges and many department chairmen, forestalling organized opposition.

Perhaps there was more of a threat to existing experiential programs---but once more the cautious wording of the mandate was important. In other words, assurances were given that existing programs, such as those in education, would not be challenged by a development and coordination office.

Basically, the UYA experience itself made a mixed contribution to the furtherance of experiential education. On the one hand the program had demonstrated the weaknesses of innovation. There were problems with vague or absent criteria for measurement and absence of faculty control of students. The "academic" validity of some of the placements was a constant question as was the fact that many UYA students entered the program with fairly weak academic records. Fortunately, however, these problems were discussed openly if not widely throughout the program and supporters of

the concept in general continued to think positively; they felt that inadequacies surfacing in UYA pointed to our concerns to be corrected or modified, and not toward elimination. And, in effect, the UYA program really affected only a small group of people. The credit mechanism, although it offered up to 30 hours of undergraduate credit, was couched in safeguards (it was pass/fail in most cases and needed departmental approval to count toward the major) and had been approved only on an experimental basis, so it too posed a limited threat.

In sum, the UYA program's primary contribution to later developments was as a stimulant, not as a paragon of academic virtue. The process of getting the grant stimulated discussion of large amounts of credit for experience in a "low risk" environment. Administrators and faculty were encouraged during the program's duration to discuss experiential education, and the UYA project staff and advisory committee formed a focal point for this discussion. Students were also exposed to off-campus work in large doses for the first time, and the novelty of their placements resulted in more publicity in the campus media than had been the case with other programs. The availability of federal funds to underwrite a broader office was, of course, a constant advantage in working with the administration.

A major link between UYA and the Office for Experiential Education was the Harris report and recommendation.* Based on interviews with virtually all academic deans, the report showed

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*Jesse G. Harris, Jr., "A University Plan for Experiential Education, 1973. Dr. Harris' proposal outlined the process of establishing and the functions of the Office for Experiential Education.

considerable support for the concept of a centrally coordinated office which would concern itself with the development of off-campus learning experiences. With the degree of support shown in this report, and coming from an unimpeachable source that it did, the Vice President and the President found it difficult to deny support for the new Office for Experiential Education from general fund sources. In July, 1973, the new office was created.

We now come to the question of how far toward the institutionalization of experiential learning we have come. To begin, let's review briefly the role of the Office for Experiential Education. The office's primary purposes are to coordinate already existing field experience programs (this does not mean, by the way, granting approval for a college or department to place students in an internship), to create a general climate receptive to experiential learning among students and faculty, to develop new field learning opportunities, to serve as a facilitator of research on the subject, and to disseminate information as broadly as possible. The office also directly administers programs with university-wide constituencies---like the state and city government internship programs and the University Year for Action program.

Thus far, the focus of the office has been on working with colleges and departments, through the new Council on Experiential Education, to encourage them to build experiential education into the curriculum. At the same time, interdisciplinary sub-committees are also at work devising ways in which the off-campus placement can be utilized to encourage department cooperation (for example, a Subcouncil for Cultural Patterns consists of representatives from Anthropology, English folklore, Geography, Sociology, and History).

Efforts have also gone into cataloguing all the university field experience programs and all the university courses being used to grant credit for field work. Research has been conducted on income taxes, workman's compensation, and minimum wage requirements.

The Office for Experiential Education exists in an environment which is generally tolerant if not wholly enthusiastic about its mission. There remains a considerable degree of academic conventionalism, a fear of eroding standards, an anxiety about the theft of credit as though it were gold being burgled out of some academic Fort Knox. The words of the poet who penned "The Deserted Campus" represent this point of view eloquently:

> CREDIT, thou elder brother e'en to grade,
> Thou hadst a being ere degrees were made,
> When to have ta'en a course meant mastering
> A discipline---not doing one's own thing!
> To what base uses has thy name been lent,
> Thou tarnish'd token of accomplishment!
> For credit they cross seas, pay gladly double
> To learn what they could here with half the trouble.
> For credit they watch plays, or hammer nails,
> Or get a clap, or hunt for Holy Grails;
> They'll lobby Congress, or their boots they'll muddy,
> If certifi'd as independent study,
> And though we fume, we pedagogues abet it;
> Ingenious are the ways of earning credit:
> They ski in Zermatt and they scour the pampas,
> They'll do most anything but stay on campus.*

Two major projects may provide a better test of the Office's ability to function. One of these is to steer course credit for experiential learning (up to 30 hours) through each academic department and the faculty senate. Thus far, twenty-four departments have endorsed the concept of the course (presented through a "model" course proposal and argumentation). The adoption of this course by appropriate departments, and later the appointment of

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*Ira Gorshan, "The Deserted Campus," Chronicle of Higher Education, April 1, 1974

specific instructors for the course will be a first tangible demonstration of success. The new course also carries with it the necessity of a written contract; thus experiential education has developed this tool and is working with students and faculty in its use.

Secondly, a major information center is being established for students who want field placement, modeled somewhat on the C/AHED (See-Ahead) Center at Michigan State University. The information center is seen as the only feasible way of dealing with hundreds of student inquiries without spending massive amounts of staff time in personal counseling.

Yet the major objective, perhaps equally as important as faculty support, is that of creating within the student body both the interest in exploring off-campus opportunities and the willingness to agressively develop off-campus experiences for themselves. As one means of achieving this, learning opportunities in Kentucky are being gathered together into something like a "whole earth catalogue." Hopefully, by attractively packaging this catalogue, and including written encouragement for students to experiment, we will at least start students on the path toward working independently.

This last point deserves digression and elaboration. It is becoming fairly obvious that the students we deal with have not been encouraged to take charge of and agressively pursue their own educations; they do not ask why they are here, what their learning goals are, or how they can best achieve their goals. In other words they have been schooled to be told what and how they are to learn. Experiential education, which depends on student

independence and initiative, cannot thrive in this environment. Consequently, not only must we create an environment where students will think "off campus," but we need to cooperate with others on the campus who are attempting to revitalize undergraduate education and encourage more creative student attitudes toward the educational process.

A corollary need, in our opinion, is to integrate experiential education into the general education program of the university. The professional schools, and in turn careerism, continue to be the mainstays of field experience. It is our opinion that it will be in the liberal arts fields that experiential learning can have its most significant impact. For it is here that the university continues to play its distinct role, not only as the keeper of the society's culture, but also as the place for helping men and women who can cope with society's complex ethical and cultural problems and who can lead personally satisfying and socially constructive lives as citizens in a participatory democracy. So we have considered that by combining liberal arts values with field placements, a new breath of life might be blown into an old academic objective. If learning by doing is a concept valid for engineers, why is it not appropriate for all decision-making citizens? If understanding the internal workings of organizations like government is a desirable object for all educated persons, as well as political scientists, why not use the experiential technique to convey the message of the humanities.

Another need, which will be more obvious to administrators at higher levels than ourselves, is to cost our efforts to determine whether our efforts are worth the price. The Office for Experiential Education at the University of Kentucky obviously

will not become institutionalized until its costs are known and are felt to be reasonable and affordable in view of the benefits derived. How these benefits can be measured is a question yet to be answered to everyone's satisfaction.

The creation of the Office for Experiential Education at UK does not mean that "experiential education" has been institutionalized at the University; it says only that an institution has been created with the goal of institutionalizing the concept. Only the first step has been taken, the most important goals lie ahead. Until the university, with full awareness and agreement, finally understands what it has done by the creation of this office, and understands the implications of experiential learning as they relate to goals long held to be important in higher education, experiential education will not be institutionalized.

Dr. Robert F. Sexton is the Executive Director of the Office for Experiential Education at the University of Kentucky. He has also served as the Director of Intern Programs for Kentucky, was a founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Center for Public Service Internship Programs, and has served on the Steering Committee of the Society for Field Experience Education. He has also served in an advisory capacity to several states and academic institutions with their experiential learning programs. His academic field is history, and he has a special interest in new approaches to undergraduate education in the arts and sciences.

Dr. John Stephenson is Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. His teaching and research in the areas of social change and regional studies of Appalachia have resulted in publication of several books and articles on these and related subjects. As Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Professor Stephenson has had an opportunity to apply abstract principles to the practice of change, in pursuit of such goals as the improvement of instruction and advising and the development of alternative teaching-learning models.